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AUTHOR	DeFigio, Nicholas F.; Elsberry, Michael J.
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ABSTRACT

The extent of any community's citizen involvement in education depends largely on its administrators and school board. Pennsylvania's Long Range Planning for School Improvement identifies six reasons for desiring community involvement, including providing citizens the opportunity to understand school board operating plans and giving the board the opportunity to inform citizens about those plans. Although the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) leaves school districts free to pursue community involvement as they see fit, it encourages the development of (1) a clear definition and understanding of the role of each community group created, (2) appropriate recruitment and selection procedures, (3) clearly defined interrelationships among and between community groups functioning in the district, (4) appropriate means of receiving and reporting information, and (5) appropriate evaluation procedures to determine community group participation effectiveness. Under PDE guidelines, technical assistance partners can provide help regarding community involvement in information and clarification, training, and monitoring. The key to effective community involvement and effective technical assistance is ongoing participatory planning that extends beyond mere consultation. (JBM)

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COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT: THE ROLE OF THE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PARTNER

Nicholas F. DeFigio
University of Pittsburgh

Michael J. Elsberry
North Allegheny School District

Introduction

Two factors, the post World War II community relations movement in school administration and the more recent "maximum feasible participation" of federal legislation has more than any other event shaped citizen participation in public education.[1] The human relations approach to administration, (considered by many to be revolution) was based on the belief that increased citizen participation leads to greater cooperation.[2] Federal legislation, especially the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 mandated an increase of citizen control over federal aid to the schools.[3]

As a result of the rise of the human relation theorists and the requirement of citizen participations attached to federal aid to schools, community involvement became a fundamental principle in the minds of most school administrators. Community involvement took on many faces. Fantini identified the following types of participation; 1) Participation for Public Relations, 2) Participation for Instruction and Curriculum Support, 3) Participation for Crisis Resolution, 4] Participation in School Governance, 5) Participation which Applies Legal Resources to Educational Problem Solving, and 6) Participation Through Citizen Consumer Lobbies for Education.[4]

The simple truth is that there are as many variations of citizen involvement in education as there are administrators and school boards. Little if any substantive community participation has resulted from human relations concepts and/or legislative mandates.[5] This fact may reflect the lack of experience, the lack of commitment and a resistance on the part of boards and administrators to search for effective citizen participation procedures.

EA 016 627

Pennsylvania School Improvement, Community Involvement

The authors of this paper can not determine precisely the philosophical and/or conceptual bases from which the Pennsylvania Department of Education developed the guidelines for community involvement in the Long Range Planning for School Improvement document. The authors can, however, speculate on what has been written and distributed by the Department.

For example, the department has identified six reasons for desiring community involvement.

1. Provide all citizens of the community, staff, students, and representatives of appropriate organizations and agencies with an interest in the schools, an opportunity to understand how the board plans to operate the schools.

2. Give the board an opportunity to inform those persons about its plans.

3. Provide an organized and systematic process for community and staff involvement.

4. Promote communication among those interested persons.

5. Promote the possibilities that the board's plans reflect the concerns and desires of these persons.

6. Promote the possibilities that the board's plans will have the support of the community/staff.[6]

A later publication from the Department encourages districts to....view the process of planning for community/staff involvement as an activity which will ultimately:

- Improve overall school-community communication.
- Increase public understanding and satisfaction regarding school operations.
- Maintain or increase ongoing community and staff participation in the total school program.
- Clarify community and staff roles in the education process.
- Create a shared sense of school and community.
- Increase mutual school-community respect.[7]

Simple speculation reveals a noncommittal position on the part of the Department of Education. Districts are free to pursue community involvement in a manner most comfortable for administrators and boards of education. Nevertheless, the Department of Education's intent is clear, community involvement is required and the means for going beyond the traditional forms of participation is encouraged.

Community Involvement Issues

Because the purpose for community involvement at the district level projected by the Department of Education is subject to many interpretations, the school board and the administrative staff are faced with at least five issues that must be resolved.

Issue 1: Develop a clear definition and understanding of the role of each community group created. Questions such as; is the group to be advisory and decision making or is the group to be policy making?, must be addressed. The role of the group most often is left to chance. Sometimes a district may want a group to serve as a reviewing group or as an evaluation group. Whatever the case, the district must determine the role of the group before individuals are selected or recruited.

Issue 2: Develop appropriate recruitment and selection procedures. District administrators must take extra care in developing recruitment and selection procedures. Most often volunteer solicitation results in the loss of minority and low income membership. Consideration must be given to reaching all sectors of the community by special invitation.

Once recruitment and selection procedures are established special consideration must be given to meeting time, place(s) to meet and transportation to and from meetings. In rural areas school administrators must consider using special buses and if cable T.V. is available consideration for its use might be

worthwhile.

Issue 3: The development of clear interrelationship among and between the various community groups functioning in the district. This issue could be considered in issue 1, however, the working relationship between and among community groups in a district is critical to the smooth functioning of all groups. How building level groups will function with district wide groups must be established very early in the consideration of the role of each group. Sometimes districts have community groups functioning at cross purposes and sometimes groups are performing the same task. The establishment of clear interrelationships will alleviate most of the problems in this area.

Issue 4: The development of appropriate means of receiving and reporting information. Clear patterns for receiving and reporting information can solve many problems that face community groups. Individuals within the district must be identified as sources of information. The community group should not have to search for needed information. By the same token, each community group must know the person(s) who will receive information and transmit information to the appropriate school officials.

Issue 5: The development of appropriate evaluation procedures to determine the effectiveness of community group participation. The effectiveness of community groups should be evaluated. The methods and procedures for evaluation should grow out of the direction established for each group. Too often the burden of collecting information rests with the members of the community group. Procedures for evaluation should lessen this burden. The establishment of simple data collection procedure should be considered over complicated, time consuming and complex procedure. How many meetings were held and what percentage of the membership attended might be more valuable than some other information.

Working relationships with community groups are hampered at times because

individuals have not had sufficient experience working with each other. School officials view the community negatively at times and the community responds negatively. Special attention must be given to this condition as well as the five issues identified.

The Role of the Technical Assistant

The Pennsylvania Department of Education offers the following services that technical assistance partners can provide:

1. Clarify LRPSI requirements for community/staff involvement.
2. Assist with status review of district community/staff involvement.
3. Meet with district staff to discuss alternative strategies for community/staff involvement.
4. Provide actual planning assistance suggesting alternative approaches to structuring committees, designing surveys, conducting public meetings, etc.
5. Broker the services of others.
6. Outline resources available for ongoing community involvement.[8]

The above services can be categorized under the broad heading, Information Interpretation and Clarification. Two additional categories, training and monitoring, further clarify the role of the Technical Assistance Partner.

Monitoring Services include:

1. Attending meetings to provide feedback concerning:
   a. progress
   b. interaction
   c. evaluation
2. Studying information flow to determine accuracy and compliance.

Training Services include:

1. Training community groups/individuals in questioning techniques.

2. Establish training sessions to deal with attitudes as well as group processes.

3. Establishing training sessions to deal with problems associated with planning goals and objectives.

Summary

Community involvement means many things to many people. To the authors of this paper, community involvement is viewed as being coterminous with the concept of participatory planning.

Participatory Planning is a proactive approach to solving problems that may confront communities during the 1980's. Moreover, it is a method of including people from diverse backgrounds, roles and functions, in a logical cooperative, planning process. This form of Community Involvement professes a basic philosophy that whatever the concern, there is a better chance something significant will result if people work together. There is, within the parameters of this planning endeavor, a stress on open participation between those who have the responsibility and/or authority to establish policies and commit monetary and human resources, and those individuals who represent the varied needs of the "community"-at-large.

Participatory Planning is also the key for the successful utilization of the technical assistance partner. In order for the technical assistance partner to be of value he/she must become an integral part of the planning process. Anything less places the technical assistance partner into the role of consultant. The concept technical assistance means much more than consultant.

Footnotes

1. Donald B. Reed and Douglas E. Mitchell, "The Structure of Citizen Participation: Public Decisions for Public Schools, p.183, Public Testimony on Public Schools, National Committee for Citizen in Education and Commission on Educational Governance, Berkeley California, 1975, (McCutchan Publishing Corporation).

2. Citizen Cooperation for Better Public Schools, Fifth-third yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I, Ed. Nelson B. Henry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

3. Reed and Mitchell, Public Testimony on Public Schools, 189.

4. Mario Fantini, The People and Their Schools: Community Participation, (Indiana, Phi Delta Kappa Education Foundation, 1975), p.22-26.

5. Reed and Mitchell, Public Testimony on Public Schools, p.214.

6. Long Range Planning for School Improvement Guidelines and Instructions, (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Department of Education, 1981).

7. Long Range Planning for School Improvement LRPSI Resource Guide 2: Planning for Community/Staff Involvement. (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Department of Education, 1981).

8. Ibid., 9.